

Looking at Lia Cook through the Maze: by Joe Lewis

In The Folds. 1997 Cotton Rayon woven 192" x 41" *

While pursuing a Masters Degree in Art and Design at the University of California, Berkeley, in the early nineteen seventies Lia Cook chose the then "Low" craft technique of weaving with which to explore the now consigned "engender" subject matter of textiles. The use of weaving to explore textiles as a subject was a way of placing herself in the heart of burgeoning feminist art theory movement that was challenging the male dominated hierarchy of the exclusionary "High" or "Fine" arts world. The motivation behind this decision to weave may have been a "statement" at the time, but it was also a door she opened and never closed.

Lia Cook's 2010 exhibition Faces and Mazes was organized by the Robert Hillestad Gallery at the University of Nebraska in the spring of 2009. Curated by Wendy Weiss it put on tour after its initial showing. A version of it came to the Textile Museum of Canada in Toronto (April 9 - October 17, 2010) On the day of the opening in Toronto I had the opportunity to speak with Cook prior to attending it. She spoke about her early days and the challenges she and other female artist faced in gaining access to the main stream art world and the absurdities of the craft art divide she exposed herself to all most by accident through her weaving.

The craft art divide in that period gave rise to what we now call fibre arts. In the attempt at positioning textile and fibre work grounded in hand technique that was taught in craft programs into fine arts questionable gains were achieved. Four decades later there is now a movement to separate crafts from fine arts and develop a craft history back ground and theoretical discourse to support and secure the continece of craft education while locating into University degree programs rather than college diploma. As a witness to this swinging pendulum of theoretical discourse on textile practices Cook has maintained a balancing act while the ground beneath her has shifted. As battles have been fought out in academic institutions, galleries, museums, on the printed page she spins a yarn twinning threads of multiple origins making skeins, for the warp and weft from which a new cloth is always being made.

The resulting article is part review, part profile and moves from the work, the mixed responses to the work, the fascination Cook developed for these responses and the ways in which she has used the medium of weaving to disrupt the ways in which people see the work to engage them to participate physically with the work if only to achieve a point of clear focus.

Lia Cook: Faces and Mazes. Textile Museum of Canada, April 9 - October 17, 2010.

55 Centre Street, Toronto Ontario Canada. left China Maze Doll, 2008, cotton and rayon, 182.9 cm X 129.5 cm (72 X 51 inches) right Big Maze: 4 Square Centimetres, 2005, cotton, 129.5 cm X 132.1 cm (51 X 52 inches)**TMC

"And yet, in this deified face, something sharper than a mask is looming: a kind of voluntary and therefore human relation between the curve of the nostrils and the arch of the eyebrows; a rare, individual function relating two regions of the face. A mask is but a sum of lines; a face, on the contrary, is above all their thematic harmony" The Face of Garbo, Roland Barthes *1

When the father of Semiotics, French philosopher Roland Barthes wrote the above he had been in the process of observing projected film, flickering light and shadow, while trying to understand the pathological responses to images of Greta Garbo. While observing Lia Cook's work in this exhibition we are responding to the interlacing of multi coloured threads depicting a face. We are looking at a surface with an image revealed by its own creation. We are looking at a bridge back into the centre of the quagmire of the art / craft historical moment of the fibre revolution, the ascendancy of feminist art criticism and the theoretical base for what is now referred to as textile/ fibre art. Exhibiting Space Continuum I, 1973, Woven, wool and cotton, 14' x 12' at the 1973 /6 edition at the Tapestry Biennale in Lausanne Switzerland along side Magdalena Abakanowicz, the polish tapestry weaver become sculpture, who was both the main stay and Nemesis of the controlled standards the Centre of Ancient and Modern Tapestry was trying to establish by presenting the biennial her acceptance as a weaver was acknowledged. Then as now, she feels her work is separate from classification by others and is dependent on her creativity which is explored in and a result of her chosen process/ production method: weaving. It has been by weaving images of woven textiles that she examined assumptions of meaning by both referencing and dislocating it.

Point of Touch: Bathsheba, 1995, Pressed linen, rayon, oils and dyes, 46" x 51" Collection of the Oakland Museum of Art, California *

It is the nature of cloth that became Lia Cook's subject matter. The physical properties rather than history, use/

function, latent meaning or conjecture. Those arenas of discourse resulted from working with the medium of fibre and shifted to what ever agenda was co-opting her work to prove their point. Despite this, through the changing times and discourse, the trajectory of her work kept its own path. With the adoption of hand jacquard weaving as a means of production, a shift occurred. The hand Jacquard loom with its ability to produce multiples and direct sampling / prototyping for industry, which were two hallmarks of the 1950s studio craft movement for ceramics and glass, meant that she moved into controversial territory and away from accepted hand weaving craft technique. With the jacquard came the ability to develop and use extremely complicated weave structures to produce elaborate imagery with pattern and texture. Cook took an almost opposite direction moving in a micro to macro focus that brought the image of structure onto the surface. Lia Cook was on the forefront of what has now been labelled the JaquArt movement which has been criticized for being a machine for reproduction like a photocopier rather than a tool for original work. Plagued by the question of why weave a photograph Lia Cook answers why not? In a very bold and increasingly aggressive way in microscopic detail (see Interweave II), scale(see Big Beach Boy), and in the case of the Embedded Portraiture pieces , sheer size. while moving directly forward continuing to do her work in her own way.

Interweave II and detail. 72" x 48" 1975

Cotton, woven; iron silver photosensitized surface * In the simplest terms Lia Cook works in series which develops through theme and variation. Through the series of works in Past /Presence , Big Baby, Un/Mask, Traces, Binary Traces to Face Maze, all created from 2000 to the present Cook's manipulation of scale and fracturing of images has made instant recognition harder and required the viewer to deeper engagement with the work. Lia Cook: The Embedded Portrait, The University of Wyoming Art Museum, May 23 - August 22, 2009 Chicago and East Galleries.* (click on Image to watch video in new window)

In Faces and Mazes she began by first weaving a number of close cropped images of some faces, then photographing it at closer range she wove an image of that weaving. From that point on she is working with images of textiles not images of faces. In this series she has woven several faces i.e. "Binary Traces: Suspect", 2004, cotton 210.8 cm x 134.6 cm (83 X 53 inches), using a different sequence of weave structures for each to produce the gradations of shading (grey scales) needed to make the image visible on the surface of the cloth. After these were woven and photographed she designed an overlay (like a veil or screen) to "interfere" with or "interrupt" the recognition of the face (ie China Maze Doll), that photographed, cropped, enlarged and woven the over sized veil takes on a maze like appearance (i.e. Big Maze) of the face that both keeps and loses its integrity completely at the same time. Viewing from a distance brings the face back into focus. (Cindy Lay, 2009, cotton and rayon, 37 x 52 inches) right Cindy II, 2009, cotton and rayon, (66 X51 inches)**TMC

The virtuosic skill with which Cook creates her images can often trap/ fascinate rather than free the viewer to respond whole heartedly to this work. How it is made has nothing to do with how it is seen. As a result of the mixed reactions of her peers from both the fine art and craft worlds to the sometimes mesmerizing quality of technique which overshadows the work itself and results in emotional reactions , she has become more and more interested in the responses. How to incorporate the ways people respond to her work, the perception of what is being seen and how it is seen has become as much apart of her current work as the image of textiles. In Faces and Mazes we are not looking at Garbo but at the familial imagery that Cook has used because their proximity rather than any deep personal meaning even though they are family photographs. These images of children and doll's faces are innocuous, mundane. They are hardly disturbing or threatening yet the emotional impact caused by the scale can and does devastate some viewers. Images of children and dolls have a long established place in the history of painting; it is a place that has shifted with the gender of the artist, as well as the politics and philosophies of the times. They are a loaded and easily manipulated subject matter that Lia Cook has stripped down and recalibrated to suit her own exploration in which the viewers/ observers / onlookers [three different levels of engagement so to speak] response to the work becomes integral to her development of it. "Material Pleasures", Installation, 14' x 25' 1993, Rayon, acrylic on linen, woven pressed, 6 pieces, Drapery- Cotton jacquard woven Muller Zell Co. Germany, part of Material Allusions Renwick Gallery of the Smithsonian American Art Museum in Washington DC from May 15 to July 7, 1996*

Through out Lia Cook's career her technique has been written about within a craft context more often than her actual work and seldom is it placed within an art historical context. There is a conundrum of sorts here in that Cook, while being a contemporary artist who works with a "craft" media in which she has developed a level of technical excellence, is recognized by her peers in the textile arts but not necessarily by hand weavers because by doing hand work with industrial machines and using computer assisted design some people think she doesn't "Make" her art. However, this skill, which has allowed her to explore concepts deeply embedded in contemporary art practices of the later half of the twenty first century, has left her outside of that critical discourse. Bridging both arenas has meant that Lia Cook's work stands as an amalgamation of many and is always on the cutting edge of new. She is always moving forward and in a way the jacquard loom enables her to (un)ravel the current work, figuratively speaking and (re)weave the next with the fibre bringing its memory, story, voice. TMC Installation shot of Binary Traces, Blur 2, 2004 woven cotton, 58 X 50 inches
to find out more about Lia Cook For current information visit her website <http://www.liacook.com/>

Notes

*1 “The Face of Garbo” Mythologies, Roland Barthes accessed May 19th 2010http://www.angelfire.com/film/merry_murderers/Epigraf_The_Face_of_Garbo_-_Roland_Barthes.htm

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